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THEATER

Understated production dulls Barker's 'Majesty'

By HERMAN TROTTER
News Critic Emeritus

NIAGARA-ON-THE-LAKE, Ont. — With this production of "His Majesty," the Shaw Festival chalks up its seventh in a series of Barker revivals that began in 1988. While the artistic result does not match the achievements of such earlier stagings as "The Voysey Inheritance" or "Waste," it does add significantly to our knowledge of Barker's neglected body of works.

"His Majesty" was Barker's last play, published in 1928 but not produced until 1993 in Edinburgh. This is the first North American staging.

Its subject, based transparently on the demise of the last of the Austrian Hapsburg emperors, offers us King Henry and Queen Rosamond of the mythical country of Carpathia, embroiled in futile post-World War I civil strife over the establishment of a new form of government or the return of the exiled monarch.

Barker has given us an extremely complex set of shifting relationships among the contesting parties. But he has couched them in a text that reads with a wonderful lyrical flow and is punctuated with whimsical contradictions and nonsequiturs that leaven the proceedings and suggest that Barker himself probably had little patience with the blustering pronouncements of politicians.

The problem is that in the dim, dingy, understated production Neil Munro and designer Sue LePage have given us, very little of the text's lyricism materializes, and the whimsical inserts are so glossed over that the audience hasn't time to savor them and put them in context.

Only David Schurmann as the king seems to sense the almost musical flow of Barker's text. Here is a deposed monarch who would rather raise poultry than rule but is spurred by a sense of duty to pursue every option for a return to power before accepting permanent exile to Bermuda. Above all, the king wants no further bloodshed. That, however, is not in the agenda of those who would manipulate him back to Carpathia as a figurehead, so he is in a blind alley.

Schurmann's performance is strong, radiating both his inner idealism and his subconscious acceptance that he is at the end of the line. As the queen, Mary Haney, who is one of the most dependable members of the Shaw company, is sadly miscast. She is unable to project any semblance of regal bearing, pose or dignity; she speaks largely in mumbles and deports herself more like the queen's chambermaid than the power behind the throne.

Ben Carlson as Count Czerniak, ready to do battle on the king's behalf, nicely reflects both his own aggressiveness and his frustration at the king's moderation. As his mother and the queen's former nursemaid, Countess Czerniak, Sharry Flett makes a small role important with a performance of measured dignity and understanding subservience.

The king's primary antagonists are the former teacher Maltravy, played with clogged punctiliousness by Michael Bull, and George Dawson as the malevolently bourgeois Mr. Bruckner. His permanently curled sypper lip reveals both his humble origins and current lust for power. An almost lost role is that of the king's adjutant Col. Guastalla, but Lorne Kennedy plays it with a subtlety of understanding about his position that seems bland at first, but in the long run is one of the very large cast's best characterizations.

Paul Sportelli's original musical score is based on the a mixture of jazz, representing "a premonition of what is to come," and a Mazurka to connote Carpathia's folk heritage. The latter works amazingly well, but the muted trumpet in the jazz sections speaks anachronistically of 1950s cocktail-lounge ambience, where something with more of an aching Kurt Weill flavor would have been more to the point.

Sets seem to have been done on the cheap but were passable until the final act's pathetic representation of the railway car that will carry the king and queen into exile. So simple a change as having the two sets of steps entering the raised platform from the same side would have at least reinforced the rectangularity of the car's proportions.

If the three-star rating conferred on "His Majesty" seems a bit generous, it has been nudged up a bit because of the distinct service to the art of the theater this production represents.

REVIEW
His Majesty
Rating: ★★★
Political drama by Harley Granville Barker.
Directed by Neil Munro; featuring David Schurmann, above, and Mary Haney.
In repertory through Sept. 21 in the Court House Theatre, Shaw Festival, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ont. (800) 511-SHAW.

MUSIC

Bluebird Cafe is flying high

By JIM PATTERSON
Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The music of a honky-tonk and the inspectral vibe of a concert hall merged 20 years ago in a Nashville strip mall several miles from the rest of the country music industry.

The Bluebird Cafe — which has been a second home for songwriters such as Jamis Ian and Kevin Welch and counts singers Garth Brooks and Kathy Mattea among its success stories — was born in summer 1982 as an upscale lunch stop for shoppers in Green Hills.

"It was suggested that we have a little live music," recalls owner Amy Kurland, one of the editors of "The Bluebird Cafe Scrapbook" (Harper Collins). "That sounded like fun, so we did it."

Two decades later, the Bluebird has its own record label and TV show, "Live From the Bluebird Cafe," on the Turner South cable network. It was the basis for the 1993 film "The Thing Called Love," starring River Phoenix.

For years, Kurland and her staff spent every Sunday afternoon auditioning all comers. The best would return that evening to perform. Now the auditions are once a month, and those earning a slot have to wait six to eight months to perform.

"The night I got to play the Bluebird for the first time, Amy introduced me like she did all the writers," Brooks recalls in the book. "It was after my first performance that she approached the microphone and, in her way, asked me to marry her. I laughed along with the rest of the crowd, but inside I felt a warm smile of acceptance."

Brooks went on to be signed to Capitol Records because of another performance at the Bluebird. Among the memorabilia pictured in the book is a signed photograph from Brooks, with an inscription to Kurland that includes, "I owe you."

As the storefront club, which seats only about 100 people, quickly morphed from restaurant to general nightclub to songwriter's haven, Kurland frequently hushed crowds and urged them to pay full attention to the music.

"It's become a bit of a joke, to the point where we put 'Shhhhh' on our flyer at every table," said Kurland.

For readers, a rock jock who knows his tunes

jeff miers

Inspired by his parents to be a Beatles fan at the age of 3, Pop Music Critic Jeff Miers started playing guitar at 13, recorded five albums with the Buffalo band the Tails, and toured. He still hunts for music perfection.

So he became a student of rock critics like Lester Bangs, Richard Robinson and Richard Meltzer. Jeff is intimate with the local music scene, having observed and written about it in weekly newspapers and magazines for years.

He also brings News readers into contact with national musicians, like Gord Sinclair (above right) of the Tragically Hip, and covers their tour stops in Western New York and Southern Ontario. Jeff recently profiled Ani DiFranco, interviewed "Little" Steven Van Zandt about his eclectic career and covered Bonnie Raitt's Buffalo appearance. No one writing locally is as enthusiastic, experienced or knowledgeable about the music you love as Jeff Miers.

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THE BUFFALO NEWS

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